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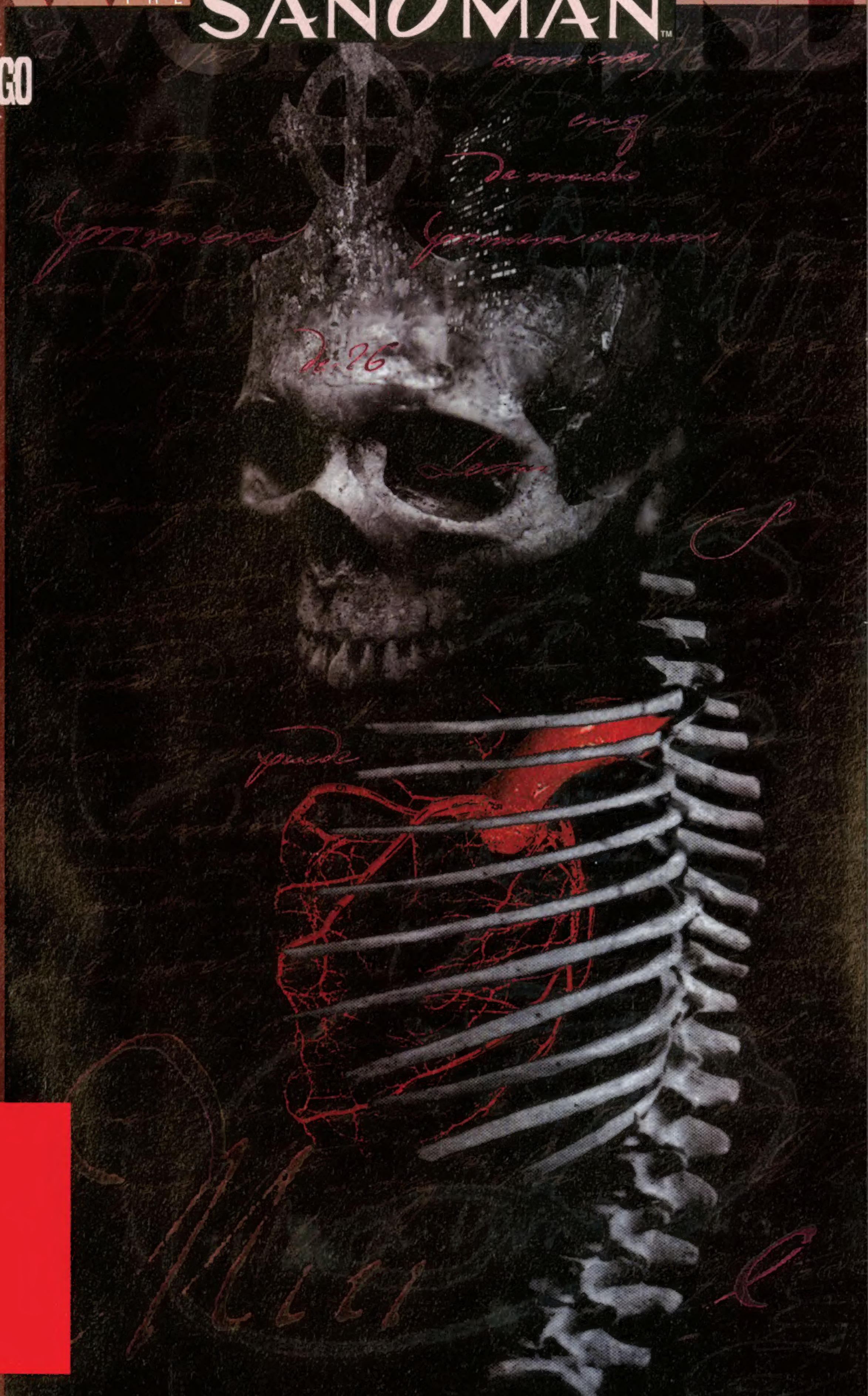
THE SANDMAN™



UH. EXCUSE ME. MS, AH...

YES?

I WAS UPSTAIRS. I'VE COME DOWN NOW.

I CAN SEE THAT.

THERE WAS AN... ORIENTAL MAN UP THERE.

I'M SURE THERE WAS.

I LOST THE STAIRCASE FOR A WHILE. DAMNEDEST THING.

THE INTERIOR OF THIS INN CAN BE SOMEWHAT CONFUSING, IF YOU ARE UNUSED TO IT.

YOU'RE TELLING ME.

HI, MISTER KLAPROTH.

SIMPLY KLAPROTH, BRANT TUCKER. NO HONORIFICS. THAT IS THE WAY OF MY PEOPLE.

RIGHT. SORRY.

ONE... TWO... THREE... FOUR... FIVE...

BUM DUM

HULLO, BRANT. HOW WAS YOUR NAP?

FINE, I SUPPOSE. DID I *MISS* ANYTHING?

YOU MISSED SOME STORIES.

WELL, I HEARD THIS WEIRD ONE ABOUT A PRESIDENT. I'LL TELL YOU LATER.

HAVE YOU TOLD A STORY YET, THEN?

ME? NO, I...

NO.

I HAVEN'T.

THE STORM'S AS BAD AS EVER. DID YOU HEAR THAT LAST THUNDER-CLAP? MADE ME THINK OF ALL THOSE STORIES THEY TOLD US AS KIDS, ABOUT GODS GETTING *ANGRY*.

SO *WHO'S* GOING NEXT?

EXCUSE ME. IF I WOULD NOT BE INTRUDING, I WOULD COUNT IT A *SIGNAL* HONOR TO TELL MY TALE-- IF MASTER KLAPROTH PERMITS.

WHY SHOULD I STOP YOU TELLING A STORY?

BECAUSE IT *IS* A *TRUE* STORY, MASTER. AND BECAUSE *YOU* ARE IN IT.

HEY, KLAPROTH. I THOUGHT YOU SAID THERE WEREN'T ANY HONORIFICS WHERE YOU CAME FROM.

IT IS *NO* HONORIFIC. PETREFAX AND KYRIELLE AND EUCRASIA HERE ARE JOURNEY-MEN UNDER ME: I *AM* THEIR MASTER.

TELL YOUR TALE, PETREFAX.

"FROM THE WINDOW OF MY SCHOOL-ROOM ONE COULD SEE THE WHOLE OF WESTERN LITHARGE.

I WOULD STARE OUT AT THE NECROPOLIS ON THE HOT SUMMER AFTERNOONS, AND WONDER ABOUT THE WORLDS BEYOND THE MOUNTAINS.

I WOULD DAYDREAM OF OTHER PLACES, OTHER PEOPLE, OTHER WORLDS...

PETREFAX!

Cerements

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Vince Locke · inker, pgs. 3–23
Bryan Talbot · penciller, pgs. 1, 2, & 24
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THE SANDMAN

Featuring characters created by
Gaiman, Kieth and Dringenberg

PETREFAX, HAVE YOU HEARD A SINGLE WORD I'VE SAID?

ME, SIR? OH, YES, SIR.

THEN PERHAPS YOU'LL DO US THE HONOR OF EXPLAINING TO US ALL THE FIVE APPROVED METHODS OF BODILY DISPOSAL, WITH THEIR VARIANTS?

OH. YES SIR. RIGHT SIR.

WELL?

I'M WAITING.

UM, FIRSTLY, EARTH BURIAL OR INTERMENT.

VARIANTS ARE BOXED, WRAPPED OR NAKED; EMBALMED OR OTHERWISE; LYING, SEATED OR STANDING; GRAVE, SEPULCHRE, VAULT OR CAIRN.

SECONDLY, DISPOSAL THROUGH FIRE. VARIANTS: CLOTHED, BOXED, PYRE, VESSEL OR SHIP. ALSO THERE ARE DIFFERENT PROCEDURES THAT CAN BE ADOPTED TO DISPOSE OF THE ASHES.

THIRDLY: MUMMIFICATION. VARIANTS: SALTING, MINERAL BATHS, DEHYDRATION. THERE'S THE THING WITH PITCH AND BITUMEN AND...

YES, YES. THE FOURTH?

FOURTHLY, DISPOSAL THROUGH WATER. VARIANTS INCLUDE FEEDING TO WATER-ANIMALS OR FISH; DISPOSAL IN SACRED RIVER OR SEA, BOXING, BAGGING WITH ROCKS, DISMEMBERMENT...

FIFTH, UM. UHH...

YES, THE FIFTH?

THE UH FIFTH. YES.

UM.

PETREFAX? WE ARE ALL WAITING...

AIR BURIAL, SIR. VARIANTS INCLUDE DISMEMBERMENT AND OTHERWISE; INGESTION BY RAPTORS OR SCAVENGERS; COMPLETE OR PARTIAL DISPOSAL.

VERY GOOD.

AND SEEING YOU FIND THE WORK *SO* EASY, I'M SURE YOU WILL FIND IT *NO* TROUBLE AT ALL TO PREPARE FOR US AN ACCOUNT OF THE AIR BURIAL OCCURRING THIS EVENING.

TOMORROW YOU CAN TELL US *ALL* ABOUT IT.

WELL, HE WAS IN A BATEY MOOD THIS DAY, EH, LYSTRA?

KLAPROTH IS *ALWAYS* LIKE THAT, POLYCARP.

SO YOU WON'T BE COMING DOWN TO THE VAULTS WITH US TONIGHT?

YOU HEARD KLAPROTH. I HAVE TO ATTEND THE AIR BURIAL. I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW THERE *WAS* AN AIR BURIAL TONIGHT. OR *WHERE*...

PETREFAX!

YES SIR?

DON'T *DAWDLE* DOWN THERE, BOY! YOU HAVE *NO* TIME TO WASTE. THE BURIAL IS IN THE LOWER REACHES OF MOUNT CALAMON. THEY WILL BEGIN WHEN THE GREAT BELL TOLLS SIX.

SIX? BUT IT'S NEARLY FIVE *NOW*...

HAVE A GOOD RUN, PETREFAX.

GIVE OUR REGARDS TO THE HAWKS!

I RAN THROUGH THE CITY, CURSING OLD KLAPROTH AS I RAN.

I WAS OUTSIDE THE CITY WHEN I FELT THE PAIN OF STITCH IN MY RIBS. MOUNT CALAMON WAS STILL A DISTANT PEAK, AND I SWORE, SILENTLY, WISHING THAT IT WAS PERMITTED TO NECROPOLITANS TO PRAY ON OUR OWN BEHALVES.

I WAS CLIMBING THE CALAMON PATH WHEN I HEARD THE BELLS OF THE CITY STRIKE SIX.

KLAPROTH WOULD TAKE MY LATENESS OUT ON MY HIDE, OF THAT I HAD NO DOUBT.

YOU ARE THE PRENTICE THAT KLAPROTH WAS SENDING US? YOU ARE *LATE*, BOY.

I AM HERMAS.

I-- I *AM*--I-- HH--I CAME-- AS FAST--AS I COULD-- HERMAS-- I--

WELL, CATCH YOUR BREATH, BOY. ANOTHER FEW MINUTES WILL MAKE NO ODDS TO THE CLIENT.

YOU ARE THE BOY PETREFAX?

AYE, SIR. I BEG YOUR PARDON FOR MY LATENESS. I *RAN* ALL THE WAY.

YOU'RE HERE NOW. TRY NOT TO GET IN THE WAY. OBSERVE, AND HELP WHEN HELP IS ASKED FOR.

YES, SIR.

YOU NEVER SEEN ONE OF THESE DONE BEFORE? WELL, FIRST YOU UNDRESS THE CLIENT.

PUT THE CLOTHES AND PERSONAL EFFECTS ASIDE FOR LATER. THEY'RE *OURS*.

NOW, YOU SEE THAT *KNIFE* MASTER HERMAS IS HOLDING?

THAT'S A *BONING* KNIFE, THAT IS. OTHER KINDS O' KNIVES IS NO GOOD. EXCEPT YOU NEED A HAMMER TO GET AT THE BRAIN-PAN.

SO, BOY. TELL ME WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT AIR BURIAL.

UH. IT'S PRACTICED IN THOSE PLACES IN WORLD THAT HAVE NO SOFT EARTH, NO RIVERS, AND LITTLE FIREWOOD.

VERY GOOD.

THIS HERE IS *SANDALWOOD*. YOU JUST NEED TO BURN A LITTLE. IT ROUSES THE BIG BIRDS UP THERE IN THE PEAKS ABOVE US.

YOU *SEE* 'EM?

I CAN SEE THEM.

IT'S NOT THE *UNCOMMONEST* METHOD OF PUTTING A CLIENT TO REST, PETREFAX, NOR IS IT THE STRANGEST.

HOWEVER, LIKE *ALL* METHODS, IT MUST BE PRACTICED WITH RESPECT AND CARE.

THERE. ONCE THE ENTRAILS ARE REMOVED WE BEGIN ON THE VARIOUS BODILY *MEMBERS*...

ouch.

I *HAVE*, ON OCCASION, REFLECTED THAT THE AIR BURIAL IS PERHAPS THE *TRUEST* REFLECTION OF WHAT WE DO, HERE IN THE NECROPOLIS.

COMPLETE DISPOSAL OF THE CLIENT, IN A HANDFUL OF HOURS.

NO *MONUMENT* TO MARK HIS PASSING. NO *URN* FILLED WITH ASHES, NO *COFFIN*, NO *PLAQUE*.

EVERYTHING IS GIVEN TO THE BIRDS: THE FLESH, THE LIGHTS, THE MEAT, EVEN THE BONES--ROUGH GROUND AND MIXED WITH BARLEY.

EVERYTHING IS SWALLOWED BY THE SKY.

"AND WHAT'S LEFT OF THE CLIENT, ONCE WE'RE THROUGH? EH?"

"UH...I DIDN'T THINK ANYTHING..."

"THREE THINGS, AND THREE THINGS ONLY:"

"ALSO OUR MEMORIES OF HIS DEPARTURE AND DISPOSAL, WHICH WE IN OUR TURN WILL TAKE TO THE GRAVE. MEMORIES OF THE SMELL OF THE CLIENT, AND THE FEEL OF HIS FLESH, AND OF THE NOISE THE WILD BIRDS MAKE AS THEY DESCEND FOR THEIR PORTION..."

"FIRST, OUR PRIDE IN A TASK DONE WELL AND HONESTLY AND WITH REVERENCE."

AND THE THIRD THING?

THE STAIN, ON THE ROCKS. BUT THE NEXT RAIN WILL WASH IT AWAY.

AND THAT IS OUR TASK COMPLETED. NOW, WILL YOU STAY FOR THE FINAL CEREMONY? OR WILL YOU LEAVE?

I'LL STAY WITH YOU.

THAT'S A WILLING LAD.

THE 'PRENTICE CALLED MIG TOOK WAXED-LINEN-WRAPPED PACKAGES FROM HIS POCKETS, LAID THEM OUT ON THE ROCKS, AND THE FOUR OF US SAT DOWN.

RIGHT. THE FIRST THING WE DO, IS WE EAT. I'M FAMISHED.

SHOULDN'T WE WASH OUR HANDS? I MEAN, THEY'RE STILL COVERED WITH BITS OF THE CLIENT.

THAT WOULD BE DISRESPECTFUL TO THE CLIENT. ANYWAY HIS REMNANTS ARE SAID TO ADD SAVOR TO THE FOOD. THAT IS THE CUSTOM OF THE PLACE FROM WHICH THE CLIENT HAILS.

YOU'RE NOT PULLING MY LEG? LIKE WHEN I WAS FIRST PRENTICED TO MASTER KLAPROTH, AND THE OTHERS SENT ME OFF TO FIND A LEFT-HANDED COFFIN?

IT'S NO JEST. EAT, AND SEE.

MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT THOSE OF US FROM THE NECROPOLIS ARE UNSCHOOLED IN THE WAYS OF OTHER CULTURES.

THIS IS NOT TRUE.

IT WOULD PERHAPS BE MORE ACCURATE TO STATE THAT WE NECROPOLITANS KNOW MORE OF THE WAYS OF THE LIVING THAN THE INHABITANTS OF THEIR CITIES DO.

WE KNOW MORE OF THEIR FUNERAL CUSTOMS, AT ANY RATE.

AND THOSE WE HAVE FORGOTTEN ARE STORED IN THE LIBRARY OF LITHARGE.

MORTALITY CAN BE A SIGNAL FOR FESTIVITY AND DRUNKENNESS; FOR MOURNING AND SOBRIETY; FOR FEASTING; FOR FASTING; FOR REMEMBRANCE OR FORGETTING.

AND WHERE OUR LAST CLIENT CAME FROM, AFTERWARDS, THEY SIT AND EAT AND TELL STORIES.

IT'S TRUE--THIS FOOD DOES TASTE BETTER. IT SHOULDN'T, BUT IT DOES. THIS TASTES REALLY GOOD. WHY IS THAT?

BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE IT SHOULD.

RIGHT. STORIES. IF NO ONE MINDS, I'LL TAKE THE FIRST SHOVEL:

THERE'S A LAND, ON THE OTHER SIDE O' THE MOUNTAINS, WHERE THEY PUNISH EVILDOERS BY HANGING THEM. A NOOSE, A SCAFFOLD, A DROP.

"THERE'S *ONE* DRAWBACK TO THIS: THERE ARE RARELY ENOUGH *HANGMEN* TO GO 'ROUND.

"OH, THE BIG CITIES, *THEY'RE* ALL RIGHT, THERE'S *MONEY* TO BE MADE BY IT AFTER ALL, AND SOMEWHERE THERE'S ALWAYS A JACK-KETCH-IN-WAITING, READY TO ADMINISTER THAT FINAL DROP.

BUT THE SMALLER TOWNS, WHERE WERE *THEY* TO GET THEIR HANGMEN FROM?

YOU'RE A HANGMAN, *NO ONE* WANTS TO *SHAKE* YOUR *HAND*.

SHAKE A HANGMAN'S HAND, AND YOU KNOW HE'S SIZING YOU UP FOR THE LAST SWING...

...ESTIMATING YOUR WEIGHT AND HEIGHT AND THE LENGTH O' THE ROPE YOU'D NEED, IF HE WAS TO SEND YOU TO RIDE THE THREE-LEGGED MARE.

SO YOU KNOW WHAT THE LITTLE TOWNS'D *DO*? IF THERE WAS NO FULL-TIME HANGMAN?

THEY'D TAKE THE HANGMAN FROM THE RANKS O' THEM AS WAS ABOUT TO HAVE TO TAKE THE LEAP FROM THE LEAFLESS TREE.

MIDNIGHT, ON THE NIGHT BEFORE THE CONDEMNED WAS DUE TO KICK--OR SOMETIMES EVEN AS HE STOOD WITH A NOOSE AROUND HIS NECK--THEY'D COME TO HIM IN HIS CELL, AND OFFER HIM THE CHOICE: SERVE AS TOWN HANGMAN, OR KICK THE WIND ON THE MORROW.

IT *WASN'T* THAT THEY'D PARDONED HIM, GEE; MERELY POSTPONED THE HEMPEN DANCE. HE HAD TO BE HANGED AT THE LAST, ELSE THE TOWN WOULD FOREVER LOSE THE RIGHT TO HAVE A HANGMAN.

WELL, *SOME* SAID YES, *SOME* SAID NO.

BILLY SCUTT, HE'D BEEN A *RESURRECTIONIST*. HE'D DUG UP THE FRESH-DEAD FOR ANATOMY.

HE WASN'T ONE O' THE *BAD* ONES: NOT LIKE THE WIDOW PRY AHEAD O' HIM-- SHE POISONED ALL HER FAMILY, EXCEPT THE TWINS, FOR A HALF-CROWN A HEAD, FOR DISSECTION, AND THE TWINS SHE SOLD TO A BAWDY HOUSE.

BILLY'D NEVER KILLED NO ONE, JUST TAKEN THEM BACK NEW-BURIED FROM THE EARTH AND SOLD THEM TO DOCTORS WHO ASKED NO QUESTIONS.

THEY CAME TO BILLY AT THE GALLOWS STEPS. "WE NEED A NEW HANGMAN," THEY SAID.

I'LL *DO* IT.

SAID BILLY, ALTHOUGH HE WAS AWFUL SCARED.

SO THEY LET HIM LOOSE, AND HE WENT HOME TO HIS WIFE, AND FROM THAT DAY FORTH HE WAS THE TOPSMAN AND THE DROPSMAN O' THE TOWN.

BILLY SCUTT WAS THE *BEST* HANGMAN THE TOWN HAD HAD. WHEN *HE* HANGED YOU, YOU *STAYED* HUNG: THE TRAP WOULD OPEN, YOU'D CUT YOUR CAPER ON NOTHING AND BE CLEAN GONE.

HE WASN'T A *HAPPY* MAN, THOUGH HE TOOK PRIDE IN HIS PROFESSION AS HE NEVER HAD WITH BODYSNATCHING.

GOOD CLEAN DROPS THAT SNAPPED SPINES AND ENDED LIVES SHARP AS A CUT. NO ONE WAS EVER HANGED *TWICE* WHEN BILLY SCUTT WAS THE DANCING MASTER.

THERE WERE *SOME* SAID THAT WAS BECAUSE HE LOOKED AT EACH POOR SOUL PREPARING FOR THE FINAL DANCE, AND KNEW THAT *THERE*, BUT FOR GRACE O' THE TOWN COUNCIL, WENT BILLY SCUTT.

EACH NIGHT HE RETURNED FROM HIS WORK AT THE GALLOWS TO HIS WIFE, HIS CHILDREN, THEIR COTTAGE, AND LOOKED AT THEM AS ONE GAZES ON PRECIOUS THINGS.

STILL, ALL THINGS END, AND BILLY SCUTT'S CHILDREN GREW LIKE ROWANS AND HAD CHILDREN O' THEIR OWN, AND HIS WIFE'S HAIR TURNED MOON-WHITE; AND ONE DAY BILLY FOUND HIMSELF UNABLE TO GET OUT O' THE BED.

I CANNOT MOVE... EVEN THE SMALLEST... FINGER.

THEY'LL *HANG* YOU *NOW*, OUR BILLY, FOR CERTAIN.

THEY SAY... JACK KETCH... IS AN EXCELLENT... PHYSICIAN ... MY LOVE...

... BUT I HAVE A DESIRE... TO DIE IN MY *OWN* BED.

THE SHERIFF'S MEN ARRIVED THAT NIGHT TO TAKE BILLY AWAY.

WE *HEAR* YOU'RE TERRIBLE *SICK*, BILLY SCUTT.

THEY'VE BEEN SAYING IT *ALL* OVER THE TOWN--

--HOW *TERRIBLE* SICK YOU ARE.

ME?

I'M *OLD*, *THAT* I'LL GIVE YOU, BUT I'M NOT *ILL*. I'LL BE SENDING 'EM OFF FOR A HEARTY CHOKE WITH CAPER SAUCE FOR YEARS TO COME.

YOU'VE GOT TO HANG BEFORE YOU DIE, BILLY.

THAT'S THE RULE...

WELL...

I'M NOT A-PLANNING TO DIE FOR A LONG TIME YET.

SO IF YOU TWO GALLOWS-RATS KEEP ON WITH YOUR WICKED WAYS, MAYHAP I'LL GET TO TIE THE HEMPEN NECKTIE ON BOTH O' YOU YET.

WELL, HE'S NOT SICK. COME ON, NED.

AND WHEN THE SHERIFF'S MEN HAD GONE, BILLY'S FAMILY LOOSED THE ROPE THAT HAD BEEN HOLDING HIM UP, AND HE COLLAPSED.

THEY PUT HIM BACK IN HIS BED.

BILLY SCUTT DIED IN HIS SLEEP THAT NIGHT, UNHUNG.

HE WAS MY GRANDFATHER.

AND THAT'S ALL.

WELL SPOKEN, MIG.

I THANK YOU, MASTER HERMAS.

WHO'S NEXT, THEN? SCROYLE? MASTER HERMAS? YOU, LAD?

I'LL TAKE THE NEXT TELLING.

I REMEMBER THE DAY I CAME TO THE CITY AS A YOUNG PRENTICE. I CAME ON THE DEATH-BARGE, DOWN THE RIVER, INTO LITHARGE. MY MOTHER SENT ME HERE, WITH MY FATHER'S BODY. ALL HIS LIFE HE'D DREAMED OF BEING INTERRED IN THE NECROPOLIS, AND WHEN I WAS BORN HE PLEDGED ME TO LITHARGE, IN EXCHANGE FOR A GRAVE IN THE CITY ITSELF.

WHEN I WAS EIGHT HE DIED AND I CAME HERE WITH HIM.

I WAS APPRENTICED TO MASTER HERMAS.

THAT WAS NINE YEARS AGO.

SINCE THEN I'VE DONE THE THINGS THAT ALL PRENTICES DO:

I CREPT DOWN TO THE LOWER CATACOMBS AND STAYED THERE ALL NIGHT, ON A DARE, AND WAS CAUGHT AND PUNISHED.

I MADE LOVE FOR THE FIRST TIME. IT WAS ON A STONE TOMB IN THE EASTERN QUARTER, AND I SPENT MY SEED ON A CARVEN SKULL.

I LEARNED TO DIG A HOLE SIX FEET DOWN AND EIGHT FEET ALONG IN A HANDFUL OF HOURS.

I'VE EXPLORED THE NECROPOLIS FROM THE DEEPEST CAVERNS TO THE HIGHEST CRAGS. I'VE LEARNED THIRTY WAYS TO STOP CLIENTS FROM SPOILING IN THE SUN, AND FIFTY WAYS TO PREPARE THE WOOD FOR A CASKET.

I'VE GUARDED CLIENTS ALL NIGHT FOR FEAR OF WITCHES STEALING THE FACE AND TONGUE OFF THEM, AND I'VE TIED A CLIENT'S BIG TOES TOGETHER WITH RED TWINE SO HE SHOULDN'T WALK IN THE NIGHT.

WE ARE THE CITIZENS OF THE NECROPOLIS LITHARGE, AND WE SERVE OUR FUNCTION.

IT IS A CURIOUS LIFE, AND AN EXACTING ONE.

IT COULD DO BAD THINGS TO YOU, IF YOU LET IT. OUR LIFE IS SPENT WITH THE DEAD.

WE ARE DRESSED IN CLOTHES WE TAKE FROM THE DEAD.

WE FEED ON FOOD OFFERINGS THAT ARRIVE WITH OUR CLIENTS.

IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY NOT TO LET IT HARDEN US.

THERE ARE PLACES IN LITHARGE, IN THE OLD QUARTER, THAT ARE BUILT OF HUMAN BONES; WHERE THIN, FINE LEATHER HANGINGS FLAP JAGGEDLY IN THE BREEZE.

I WAS IN ONE OF THOSE PLACES AT DAWN, REFLECTING ON TRANSIENCE AND MORTALITY AND LOVE, WHEN I MET THE TRAVELLER.

TRAVELLERS IN LITHARGE ARE RARE ENOUGH. CLIENTS COME HERE, AND PRENTICES; AND THERE ARE SOME MOURNERS THAT COME ON PILGRIMAGE TO PAY THEIR LAST RESPECTS.

BUT TRAVELLERS ARE RARE.

THIS ONE CAME STROLLING THROUGH THE CITY WITH A BUNDLE ON HIS BACK, AND HE SAT BY THE SHRINES ON THE CORTEGE OF SOULS AND ATE HIS BREAD AND CHEESE.

G'DAY, SAYS HE.

G'DAY, SAYS I.

IT'S A FINE CITY YOU HAVE HERE, HE SAID.

THAT IT IS, SAID I. WE'RE PROUD OF IT.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE PLACES LIKE THIS. ONCE THE SPIRIT'S FLOWN AND THE SPARK OF LIFE HAS GONE, THEN THE RITUALS OF FAREWELL ARE NEEDED.

ALL THE RITUALS WE GO THROUGH TO HELP US SAY GOODBYE.

YOU *HAVE* TO SAY GOODBYE.

THEY HAVE OTHER FUNCTIONS, TOO, THOSE RITES.

IT IS A FEARFUL THING TO BE HAUNTED BY THOSE WHO LOVED US ONCE.

IT IS A FEARFUL THING TO HAUNT THOSE ONE LOVES.

THIS *IS* LITHARGE, ISN'T IT? IT HASN'T CHANGED MUCH SINCE *LAST* I WAS THIS WAY.

THE NECROPOLIS LITHARGE DOES *NOT* CHANGE.

EVERYTHING IS MUTABLE...THIS ISN'T THE *FIRST* NECROPOLIS, YOU KNOW.

"THERE WAS A NECROPOLIS, BEFORE IT. *THAT* NECROPOLIS, WHICH IS NO LONGER NAMED, WENT BAD. IN THAT NECROPOLIS THEY BEGAN TO REGARD WHAT THEY DID AS A JOB, NOT A TASK. THERE WAS NO *CARE*, NO *LOVE*.

"THERE WAS NO LONGER A SENSE OF COMPLETION. BODIES WERE PLACED IN GRAVES...

"...OR BURNED, WITHOUT RESPECT OR LOVE OR SOLACE."

CLIENTS. WE CALL THEM *CLIENTS*.

VERY *WISE* OF YOU. *THESE* PEOPLE DIDN'T. *THEY* SAID NO PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD, NOR WISHED THEM WELL.

THE CITY'S UNDERTAKERS DID WHAT THEY UNDERTOOK WITH*OUT* A SENSE OF ITS IMPORTANCE. *BODIES* CAME *IN* TO THE CITY, AND *BODIES* WERE DISPOSED OF.

"THEY HAD BOOKS OF CEREMONIES, BUT THE BOOKS BECAME WORMY AND CRUMBLED TO DUST, FOR NO ONE CARED FOR THEM.

"THEY HAD TOMBS AND CATACOMBS AND TOWERS AND RIVERS. BUT THE BUILDINGS COLLAPSED AND THE RIVERS BECAME BLOCKED WITH BONES AND REMAINS AND THEY PUTREFIED AND STANK."

THE HEARTS OF THE NECROPOLITANS HARDENED AND COARSENED WITHIN THEM.

THEN ONE DAY SIX STRANGERS CAME TO THE CITY.

OUR SISTER IS DEAD, THEY SAID.

WHERE'S THE BODY? WHERE'S THE OFFERING? ASKED THE NECROPOLITANS.

WE HAVE BROUGHT NO BODY, SAID THE VISITORS.

WE HAVE COME FOR HER CEREMENTS, AND FOR THE BOOKS OF RITUAL WHICH ARE IN YOUR KEEPING, THEY SAID.

THE NECROPOLITANS LAUGHED, THEN, AND CALLED THEM MAD.

THEN THE OLDEST OF THE SIX RAISED HIS HEAD.

HE WAS DRESSED IN GRAY FROM HEAD TO FOOT, HIS EYES HIDDEN IN THE COWL OF HIS ROBE.

THIS IS NO TRUE NECROPOLIS, HE TOLD THEM.

YOUR CHARTER IS REVOKED.

THIS IS NO LONGER A CITY. IT IS OVER. IT IS ENDED.

AND A GREAT WIND CAME DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINS, AND THE CITY DIED. NOT A STONE REMAINED ON STONE. THE RIVER DRIED UP, REVEALING OLD BONES. THE EARTH SWALLOWED THE GRAVES AND THE MAUSOLEUMS AND THE BUILDINGS.

AND THE EARTH CRUMBLED TO DRY SAND, AND *THAT* NECROPOLIS WAS NO MORE, AND ITS NAME WAS FORGOTTEN.

THE VILLAGE OF LITHARGE WAS GIVEN A CHARTER, PROCLAIMING IT TO BE A NECROPOLIS.

AND *THAT'S* HOW YOUR CITY CAME TO BE.

THE TRAVELER FINISHED HIS BREAD AND CHEESE AND WALKED AWAY, SINGING, OUT OF TUNE, A SONG OF HIS OWN COMPOSITION.

HOW DO YOU *KNOW* IT WAS OF HIS OWN COMPOSITION?

HE *TOLD* ME.

IS THAT *TRUE*?

IS THAT HOW LITHARGE WAS FOUNDED?

THAT'S A *POSER*.

THE SITHCUNDMAN, WHO SITS MOSTLY THESE DAYS IN THE LIBRARY OF LITHARGE, TELLING HIS MEMORIES, *ONCE* TOLD ME THAT THE WRITTEN HISTORY OF LITHARGE GOES BACK OVER EIGHTY THOUSAND YEARS.

BUT THERE IS *MUCH* EVIDENCE THAT THE CITY EXISTED BEFORE THAT--CERTAIN INSCRIPTIONS ON HEADSTONES, FOR EXAMPLE.

WE WERE HERE BEFORE *ANY* OTHER CITY THAT NOW STANDS.

AND WE WILL SING THE FUNERAL SONGS THAT ARE SUNG FOR CITIES FOR THEM WHEN *THEY* DIE.

NO. I DO *NOT* KNOW IF SCROYLE'S TELLING HAS ANY TRUTH IN IT OR NOT.

NOR DOES IT MATTER. THE TALES WE TELL FOR THE DEAD ARE *NOT* TOLD TO *TEACH* US...

ACTUALLY, IT PUTS ME IN MIND OF A STORY *I* HEARD, WHEN *I* WAS A SMALL CHILD, AND OF THE UPSHOT OF THE STORY.

I WAS PRENTICED TO MISTRESS VELTIS. YOUR *OWN* MASTER, PETREFAX, HE WAS BOUND PRENTICE ALONG WITH ME.

MISTRESS VELTIS WAS OLD, EVEN THEN, AND WOULD NOW TAKE NO MORE THAN TWO PRENTICES AT A TIME, THOUGH SHE MADE US DO THE WORK OF TEN.

SHE'S *DEAD* NOW, AND KLAPROTH AND I LAID HER OUT AND WASHED HER, AND WRAPPED HER IN ROYAL PURPLE VELVET, DUG HER GRAVE, AND FILLED IT, AND CARVED HER MARKER, AND FEASTED ON ROASTED FISH ABOVE HER, WHEN SHE DIED.

SHE WAS A WISE WOMAN. SHE TOLD US THAT WHAT WE DO IS NOT FOR THE DEAD. DEATH IS NOT ABOUT THE DISPOSAL OF THE CLIENT.

WHAT DO THE *DEAD* CARE WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM? *EH?* THEY'RE *DEAD.*

ALL THE TRAPPINGS OF DEATH ARE FOR THE *LIVING.* IT IS THE FINAL RECONCILIATION. THE LAST FAREWELL.

SHE WAS A GREAT WOMAN. I HAVE NEVER SEEN HER LIKE.

THERE WAS A SMALL GIRL BROUGHT TO US AS A CLIENT, CRUSHED IN A ROCK FALL, A MESS OF MEAT AND BONE.

AND WHEN MISTRESS VELTIS HAD FINISHED SHE WAS THE SWEETEST LITTLE THING, IN THAT TINY CASKET. YOU WOULD HAVE THOUGHT SHE WAS MERELY SLEEPING.

AND MISTRESS VELTIS DID ALL THIS WITH ONLY HER LEFT HAND, FOR HER RIGHT WAS WITHERED.

EACH MASTER OF LITHARGE TAKES PRENTICES. WE TEACH THEM, AND THEY WORK, AND LEARN.

SOME PRENTICES BECOME MASTERS IN THEIR TURN. SOME TRY BUT FAIL, AND ARE SENT OUT INTO THE WORLDS BEYOND, WHERE THEY BECOME GREAT MORTICIANS (FOR EVEN OUR CAST-OFFS ARE SUPERIOR TO ANY TRAINED IN THE WORLD OUTSIDE).

SOME GO BAD, AND THESE ARE DEALT WITH APPROPRIATELY BY THE ANGKOU.

EVERY FEW GENERATIONS WE SEND A PRENTICE OUT INTO THE WORLD BEYOND, TO LEARN ALL HE CAN, AND TO RETURN.

MASTER HERMAS? THE TALE?

I'M GETTING TO IT, MIG.

ONE NIGHT THERE WAS A BLACK STORM COME DOWN FROM THE QUINSY MOUNTAINS,

WE WERE BUT CHILDREN, THEN, AND WE LAY ON OUR SLABS WRAPPED IN THIN BLANKETS, AND SHIVERED FOR FEAR, UNABLE TO SLEEP.

MISTRESS VELTIS CAME TO THE ROOM. AT FIRST WE THOUGHT SHE HAD COME TO WHIP US FOR NOT BEING ASLEEP, AND WE FEIGNED SLEEPFULNESS.

INSTEAD SHE BEGAN TELLING US STORIES -- TALES THAT MUST HAVE BEEN OLD WHEN SHE WAS A GIRL.

THERE WAS *ONE* ABOUT A MORTICIAN WHO OUTWITTED A GIANT, AND INHERITED A KINGDOM THEREBY.

ANOTHER ABOUT A POOR GRAVEDIGGER WHO DUG DOWN TO A MAGICAL LAND UNDER THE WORLD AND BROUGHT BACK A PALE BRIDE WHOSE FEET NEVER QUITE TOUCHED THE GROUND.

THERE WAS A STORY ABOUT A COACH-FULL OF PRENTICES AND A MASTER, SWEPT AWAY FROM LITHARGE BY DARK MAGICS, WHO TOOK THEIR REFUGE IN A TAVERN, WHERE THE PRICE OF HAVEN WAS A TALE.

AND *THEN* SHE TOLD US THAT WHEN SHE WAS A GIRL SHE HAD BROKEN A FLASK OF PRESERVING FLUID.

SCARED, SHE RAN AND HID FROM HER MASTER, AND SHE RAN INTO THE CATACOMBS BENEATH THE CITY.

SHE TRAVELLED A WAY SHE HAD NEVER BEFORE GONE, IMPELLED BY FEAR OF THE HIDING WAITING FOR HER, PICKING LEFTS AND RIGHTS RANDOMLY, HEADING EVER DOWNWARD.

AND THEN SHE FOUND HERSELF IN A HUGE ROOM, SOMEWHERE BENEATH THE CITY.

THERE WERE SIX SILVER CEREMENTS HANGING IN THAT ROOM, SHINING IN THE DARKNESS; AND A HUGE BOOK, LOCKED CLOSED, ON A LECTERN.

AND A VOICE SAID TO HER:
WHICH OF THEM IS DEAD?

NO ONE'S DEAD. NOT THAT I *KNOW* OF. JUST THE *USUAL* PEOPLE.

I BROKE A FLASK OF PRESERVING FLUID. I RAN *AWAY.*

THERE WAS NOBODY IN THE ROOM, NO ONE TO TALK. BUT A VOICE FROM THE DARKNESS LAUGHED.

THIS IS NO PLACE FOR YOU, LITTLE GIRL. LET ME SLEEP UNTIL I AM NEEDED.

BUT I *DARE* NOT *LEAVE*. MY MASTER WILL HAVE THE *SKIN* OFF MY BACK.

THERE WAS A PAUSE, IN THAT EMPTY ROOM.

VERY WELL. THE FLASK IS MENDED, AND FILLED, AND YOUR MASTER HAS NOT NOTICED YOUR ABSENCE.

NOW, LEAVE THIS PLACE, AND I WILL GUIDE YOUR FEET TO THE WORLD ABOVE.

HOW DO *I* KNOW THAT YOU'RE TELLING THE *TRUTH*?

AH, WELL. *THERE'S* A QUESTION. HAD YOU HAD FAITH AND NOT DEMANDED PROOF YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN WISER.

BUT SEEING YOU NEED *PROOF* THAT I SPEAK TRULY...

LOOK AT YOUR RIGHT HAND.

AND THE GIRL VELTIS LOOKED AT HER HAND AND AS SHE LOOKED, IT WITHERED AND TWISTED.

THAT'S YOUR PROOF, SAID THE VOICE.

AND THE GIRL RETURNED TO THE WORLD ABOVE, AND ALL WAS AS THE VOICE HAD SAID IT WOULD BE.

AND, OVER THE NEXT SIXTY YEARS, SHE SEARCHED THE CATACOMBS A HUNDRED HUNDRED TIMES, SHE TOLD US, LOOKING FOR THE PATH TO THAT ROOM.

THAT WAS THE TALE SHE TOLD ME AND KLAPROTH, THAT NIGHT, WHILE THE STORM PLAYED OUT ITS COURSE.

YEARS PASSED BY, AND MISTRESS VELTIS GREW NO YOUNGER.

WHEN SHE FELT HERSELF DYING SHE LIT A BRAND, AND MADE US ESCORT HER TO THE ENTRANCE TO THE CATACOMBS, TO HUNT ONCE MORE FOR HER ROOM.

SHE WALKED INSIDE, AND BADE US WAIT FOR HER AT THE ENTRANCE.

WE WAITED THERE FOR A DAY AND A NIGHT, KLAPROTH AND I, AND, IN THE END, WE HEARD A SHRILL SCREAM, AND MISTRESS VELTIS STUMBLED OUT INTO THE DAYLIGHT.

AND WE CARRIED HER BACK TO OUR DIGS, AND SENT THE MESSAGES TO THE REST OF THE CITIZENS OF LITHARGE, THAT THEY WERE LESS BY ONE.

WE LAID HER OUT IN HER PARLOR, AND ALL OF LITHARGE FILED BY TO PAY THEIR LAST RESPECTS.

AND IF ANYONE *ELSE* NOTICED THAT HER RIGHT HAND WAS WHOLE AGAIN, WELL, THEY SAID NOTHING.

THERE.

THAT'S *MY* TALE.

SO, *PETREFAX*. YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE OF US WHO HAS NOT TOLD A STORY

BUT THEN, YOU ARE *NOT* OF THE CLIENT'S FUNERAL PARTY.

DO YOU *WANT* TO?

I HAVE NO STORIES TO *TELL*.

I HAVE *DONE* NOTHING. I HAVE MET NO STRANGERS, VISITED NO FOREIGN LANDS, WITNESSED NO MIRACLES, NOR ANYTHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY.

I HAVE LIVED THE LIFE OF *ANY* PRENTICE IN LITHARGE.

I DO AS MASTER KLAPROTH TELLS ME, AND I ASSIST HIM IN ALL HE DOES AND WILLS, AND I STUDY UNDER HIM, SO THAT, PERHAPS IN TIME, I MAY BE A CITIZEN OF LITHARGE, AND HAVE PRENTICES OF MY OWN.

I KNOW COSMETICS, AND TAXIDERMY, AND CARPENTRY, AND MASONRY, AND ALL THE FUNERARY ARTS.

I CAN BUILD A CATAFALQUE OR MAKE A PAPER WREATH OR BOIL A SKULL AS WELL AS ANY PRENTICE IN THE NECROPOLIS.

BUT I HAVE NO *TALES*.

IN MY HEART I DREAM OF VISITING DISTANT PLACES.

CERTAINLY, AS A CITIZEN OF THE NECROPOLIS, I WOULD BE TREATED WITH RESPECT AND ADMIRATION. I KNOW I WOULD HAVE TALES APLENTY, WERE I TO TRAVEL IN WORLDS BEYOND...

WELL, WE'VE TOLD *THREE* STORIES, AND SWALLOWED A NIGHT. THAT'S *ENOUGH*.

SCROYLE. MIG. PACK UP AND WALK BACK.

MASTER KLAPROTH WAS WAITING FOR ME AT THE GATE OF THE CITY.

IT WAS SIX MONTHS LATER BEFORE I DARED TO ASK HIM ABOUT THE ROOM BELOW THE CATACOMBS, AND THE BOOK, AND THE CEREMENTS...

...BUT I ONLY LEARNED *MORE* WHEN I WAS RAISED FROM PRENTICE TO JOURNEYMAN, AND SWORE ON THE BAGULKAL THAT I WOULD TELL--

HOLD YOUR TONGUE!

BUT MASTER KLAPROTH--

PETREFAX: YOU HAVE THE KEY TO THE CITY?

YES, MASTER.

WHERE DO YOU KEEP IT?

WHAT IS ITS VIRTUE?

TO OPEN AND SHUT, TO SHUT AND TO OPEN.

HOW LONG IS THE CHAIN TO THE KEY?

IN AN IVORY BOX, BETWEEN MY TONGUE AND MY TEETH, AND WITHIN MY HEART, WHERE ALL MY SECRETS ARE KEPT.

THERE ARE STRANGERS PRESENT. YOU WILL *HUSH* NOW.

AS LONG AS FROM MY TONGUE TO MY HEART.

SO, WHAT, HE CAN'T *TELL* US ANY *MORE*? BECAUSE IT'S SOME KIND OF... *TRADE SECRET*? YOU HAVE *GOT* TO BE JOKING.

HE HAS TOLD YOU MORE THAN HE *SHOULD* HAVE DONE AS IT IS.

I DON'T SEE *WHY* HE CAN'T TELL US YOUR DUMB SECRETS. I MEAN, *WE'LL* NEVER TELL ANYONE. WE DON'T *CARE*.

I'VE FIGURED IT ALL *OUT*, YOU SEE. WE'RE *DEAD*.

WE'RE *ALL* DEAD. THAT'S WHY WE'RE *HERE*.

YOUNG *MAN*.

IF *YOU WERE* DEAD, I THINK *I* WOULD *KNOW* IT. I HAVE *SOME* EXPERIENCE IN THESE MATTERS.

WELL, DOES ANYONE HAVE A *BETTER* EXPLANATION?

ACTUALLY, YES.

I DO.

TO BE CONCLUDED

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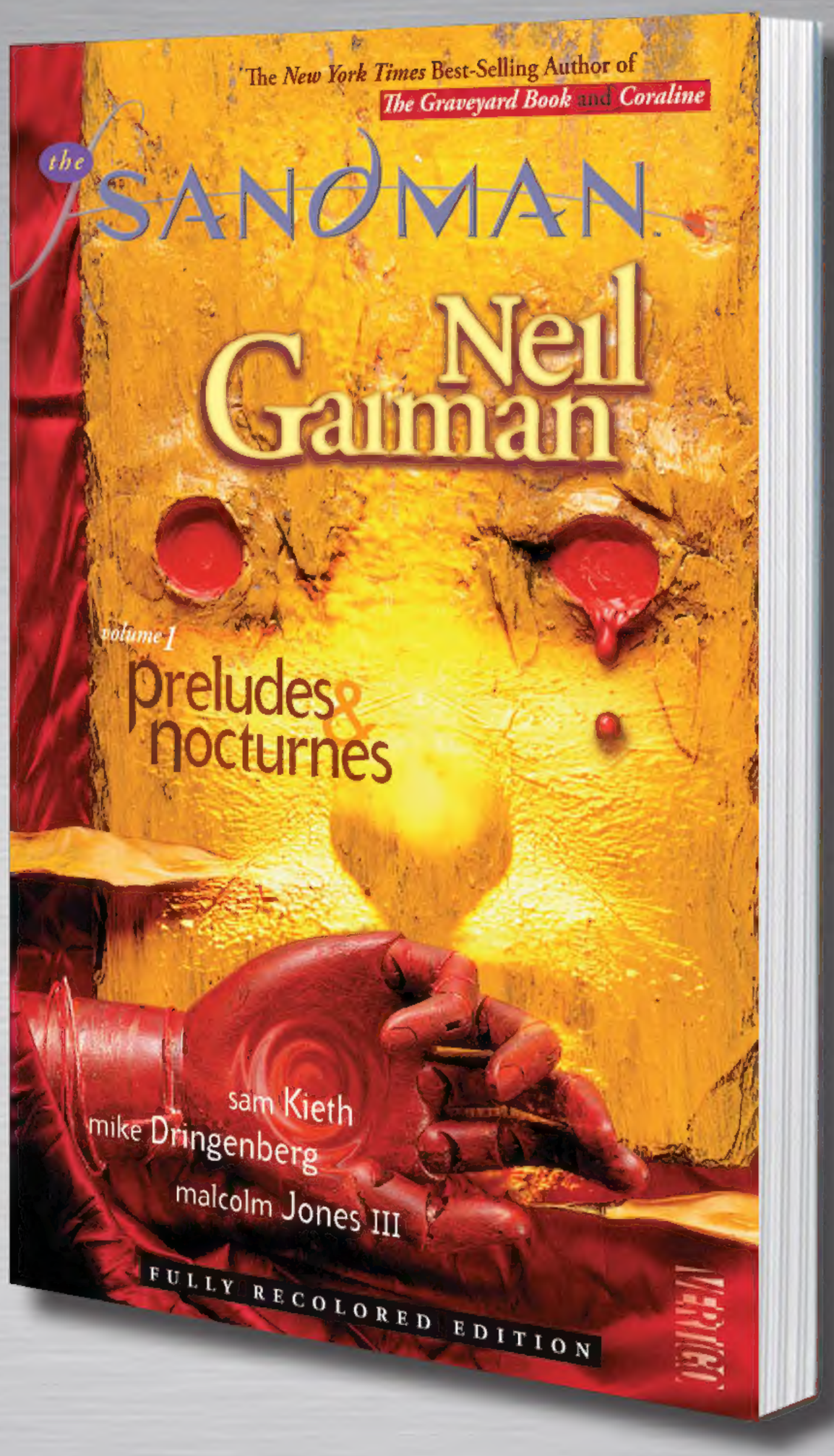

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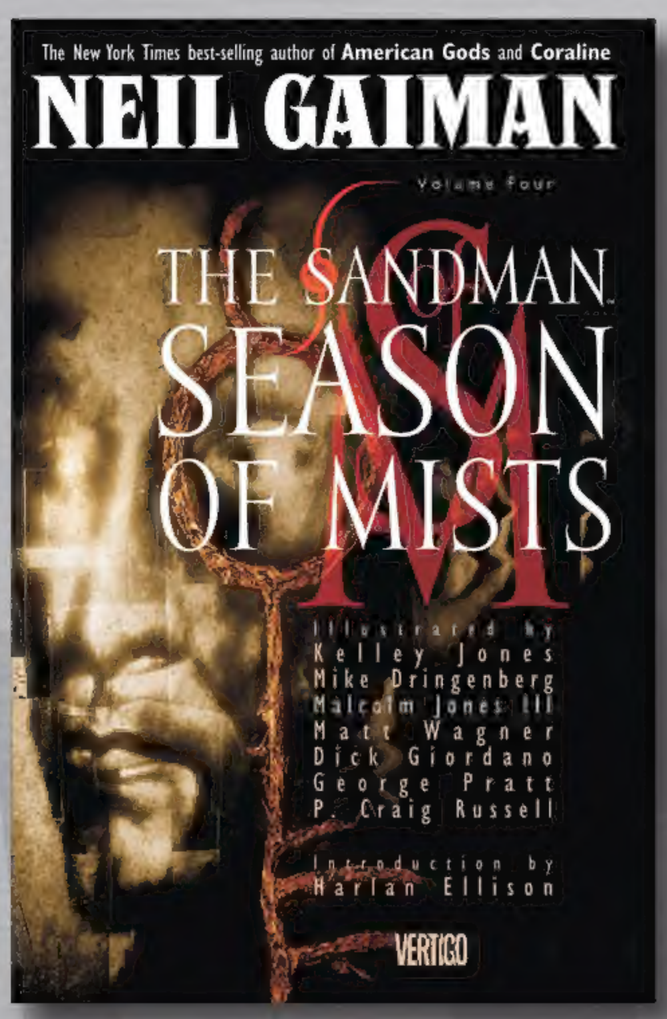

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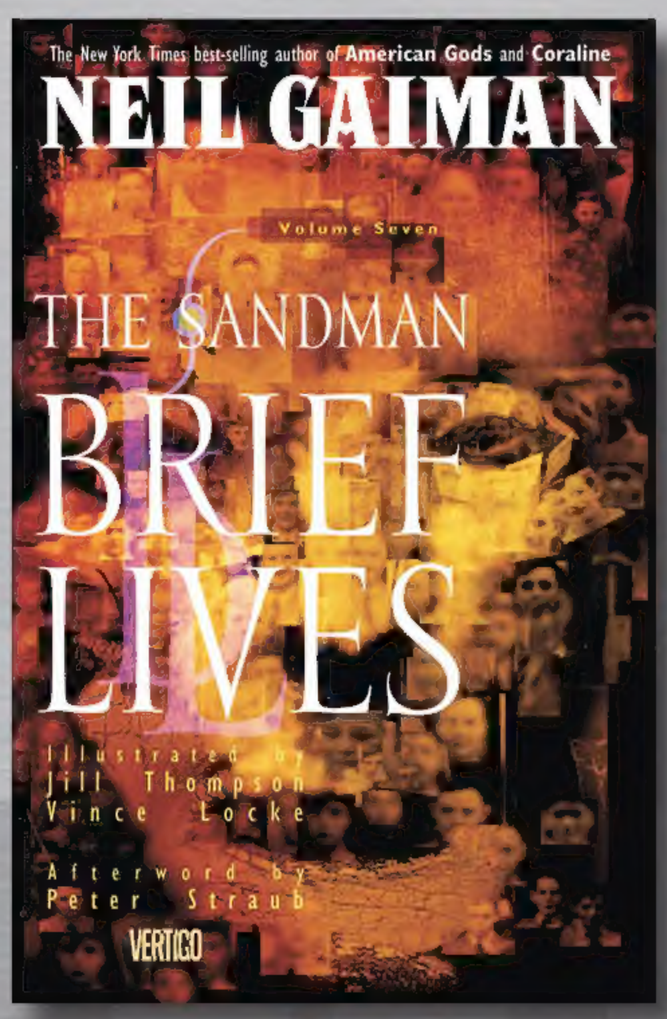

THE SANDMAN:
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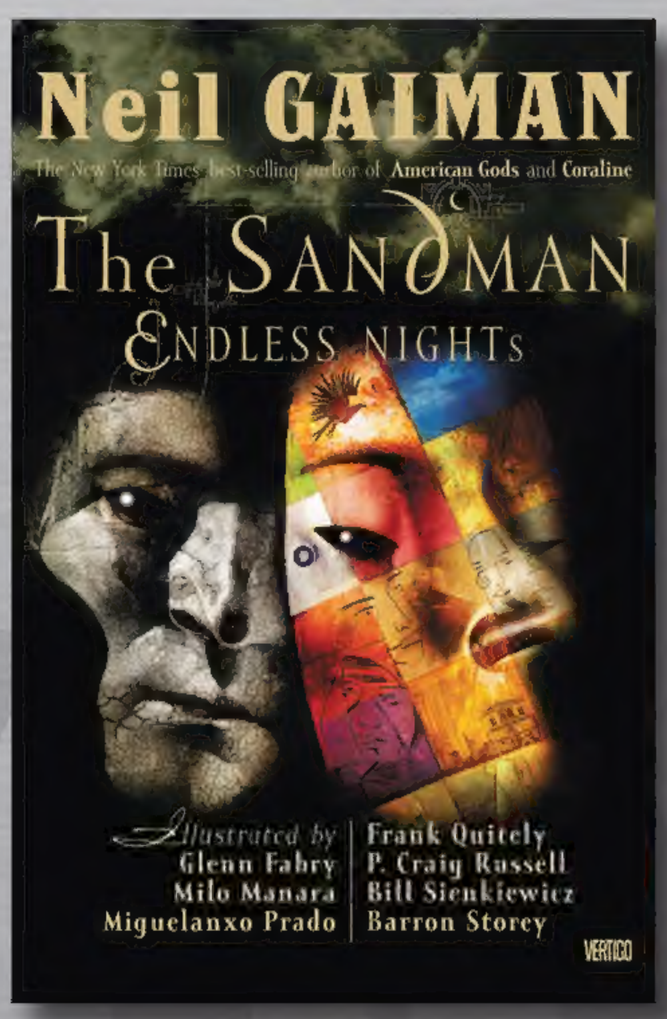

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